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## ABSTRACT

This paper presents findings of a case-study analysis of the first year of a superintendent, with a focus on the relationship between school-district context and individual characteristics. The case study was conducted as part of a larger, national study comprised of 13 case studies of the superintendency across the United States. The case study examines the situation in which a woman superintendent was recruited to head a school district in the southeastern United States. She understood from the beginning that she was not the school board's first choice. She was faced with an immediate sales tax election and the need to garner support from community and business groups who had not been consulted in her recruitment, as well as conflict over the new social agenda she wished to implement. The superintendent had prided herself on separating politics from personal feelings; however, she found at the year's end that her working relationships with the school board had become political and personal. This story illustrates how district context (based on traditional notions of student academic achievement and standards) and political culture of the county conflicted with the superintendent's agenda for a broad curriculum that addressed social problems. Although the board voted to extend her contract at the end of the year, she declined to stay. Contains 13 references. (LMI)

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# *A Case Study of a First Year Superintendent: The Relationship between Person and Context*

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Paper presented at the 1995 Annual Meeting of AERA, San Francisco

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## ABSTRACT

Through the words and actions of Ms. Kathleen Connors, her first year superintendency is described as a mixture of context [a southeastern suburban school district], educational reform [passage of a bond issue with a social agenda emphasis], and her caring and vulnerable leadership style. Although the triumphs seemingly outweighed the ordinary list of superintendent frustrations, her desire to remain in the job waned.

## **A Case Study of a First Year Superintendent: The Relationship between Person and Context**

This paper is part of a larger, national study on beginning superintendents. The scope of the research design included beginning superintendents from across the United States, representing urban, suburban, and rural school districts, as well as gender differences. In all, 13 year long case studies of superintendents were conducted by 11 researchers. Each researcher followed a similar interview and observational protocol, but was free to pursue contextual issues as they emerged during the first year.

This AERA discussion addresses the specific interactional influences between a district's context and personal characteristics -- two of the three superintendent leadership dimensions outlined by Johnson and Verre (1993) -- in assessing the effects on beginning superintendent leadership. A more popular restatement of the question might be to ask whether "being the right person in the right place at the right time" has any truth to it. More specifically, why is it that some persons come to an administrative job with no intention of staying beyond a certain timeframe or objective, yet end up doing that job for a lifetime? Conversely, how come others who initially see a job in terms of a longterm commitment, quickly leave because "things don't work out"? Clearly, one case study cannot answer questions concerning contingency leadership (Fiedler, 1969/89) or of exit and longevity; but, it can relate a real life story that either reflects a larger pattern on superintendency leadership or stands alone as an anomaly. Without giving away surprise endings, the interplay of context and person in this case study is categorized as an anomaly, not solely because an "insider" left the superintendency after 18 months, but rather because this particular insider never lost sight of her leadership strengths and other career/life possibilities.

### Person-Context Interactions

The meaning of person and context varies across disciplines and research studies (Bogotch, Keaster, Baldwin, & Wonycott, 1995). It is not the purpose here, however, to add to those discussions; rather, two "givens" regarding context become prominent reference points: (1) context has "power" (Erlandson, 1992; Iverson, 1991) to influence individual attitudes, ideas, and actions; and, (2) researchers should be "sensitive" to that power in their designs and analyses (Wimpelberg, Teddlie, & Stringfield, 1989).

After in-depth descriptions of the specific district context and personal characteristics, the conclusion looks at the interactional effects on superintendency leadership. Among the underlying issues woven within this case study are: (a) being a woman in a predominantly male political culture; (b) having an atypical educational and work background for the role of superintendent; (c) having a caring and vulnerable leadership style, emanating from a concern for children; and (d) trying to implement a social change agenda in a "stable," suburban context. By design, the paper does not strictly follow a chronology of the

year's events, thereby interrupting the telling the "story." Hopefully, the analysis of the context and person variables and their interactions can stand as its own interpretive framework. Lastly, the names of the superintendent, Kathleen Connors, her school district, Madison County Public Schools, and location, Georgia, are fictitious; but, the person and context interactions, geographic proximities, and gender types all reflect actual situations and relationships.

### Context

Along the dimension of context are issues of district demographics, superintendency selection process, school tax bond election, school board relations, and implementing a new social agenda. Context, therefore, becomes a matter of geo-political factors (Bogotch, et al., 1995).

#### Madison School District Demographics:

The Madison County Public School System has 82 schools, 7,000 employees, and approximately 60,000 students. The district's population of white middle and working class families have grown to almost the size of its neighboring city; during the past two decades, the district has been experiencing increasing social problems, such as poverty and violence, from which many white flight families had sought refuge. Geographically, Madison County is so large in area that within its borders are rural schools with only one road in and out: urban schools surrounded by subsidized housing projects, and vast stretches of look alike streets of the white working class. Today, it is a caldron where traditional American values are challenged daily by social change and resistance.

Economically, it is the second largest employer in the county after the shipyards, yet, through longterm neglect and historical support of Catholic schools, Madison County's public schools in 1993 were over six million dollars in debt, with its teachers earning less than those in any of the surrounding school districts.

The economic situation has gradually reduced the size of the district's central office. On the one hand, Madison County has received national prominence for its very efficient ratio of administrators to students; on the other hand, the reductions in staff have had a significant effect on the superintendent's office:

There isn't much central office left anymore. We kind of have staff development everyday because there are so few of us, we see each other every single day and we often have little five or ten minutes of discussions on issues we really think are important. I could get in this room right here every person who works in the central office in an administrative position.

Ms. Connors has neither a deputy, nor assistant, nor even her own full-time secretary [i.e., she shares a secretary with the School Board]; there is

nobody who works directly with me to whom I can say here go

write this letter or go take care of this problem or you go cut this ribbon today; there's really nobody else to do it.... I would certainly recommend [that the next superintendent] needs someone to help. ... [T]he volume of mail and telephone calls by itself...; you would never get out of your office and I like being out of my office. I often get the visual image of myself as the man on Ed Sullivan spinning the plates; you know that by the time I get the last plate spinning, I've got to rush back to the first plate to keep it spinning and I'm always fearful I'm going to break one.

### Superintendent Selection

Kathleen Connors was on sabbatical at her Nevada "retirement" home when she received a telephone call from a School Board member, asking her if she would be willing to have her name submitted in application for the position of Superintendent. The district had just been through a seven month national search and two interim superintendents. Thus, the offer provided Kathleen with no illusions that she was their unanimous, first choice. "I think there were Board members who wanted somebody else and there were Board members who did not want somebody in particular. I wound up being the person that everybody could agree on. Not necessarily everyone's first choice, but most assuredly, not anyone's last choice."

I think they felt comfortable with my level of professionalism; they knew I was a fair [person], ...and that I wasn't interested in the politics of the board.

So, with a 7-0 vote and two abstentions, Ms. Kathleen Connors was officially appointed Superintendent of the Madison County Public Schools.

The haste with which the Board acted in naming Ms. Connors contrasted with its deliberate political bargaining process. In so doing, many of the traditional power brokers and business leaders were not consulted in her being selected. Some even questioned the propriety of the choice in that school board had acted in naming Ms. Connors, -- who hadn't even filed a formal application for the position. During the turbulent months of her entry, this issue resurfaced when Ms. Connors asked for political and business support in winning a school tax bond election. On principle, a number of associations including the Chamber of Commerce and the prestigious Metropolitan Area Committee many chose to remember the being slighted in her selection, thereby declining to help.

### The Sales Tax Bond Issue

On assuming the superintendency, Ms. Connors felt a sense of urgency. Madison County Public Schools were desperate to pass a sales tax referendum. The voters of Madison County had not been kind to school bond issues. Residents had not passed any new school tax increases since 1979. Passage of this sales tax was estimated to bring in \$22 million a year for 10 years, which would not only

erase the budget debt, but also solidify revenues for new program development.

Certainly the night the Board directed me to go out with a 1/2 cent sales tax proposition...that really has set the focus and tone for several months.... I had to go to the capital and petition the legislature for the passage of a bill to allow us to actually seek a revenue measure on the ballot. Then I had to go before the Bond Commission and have it approved. There was an amazing amount of very complicated work that had to be done when I first got here and it really was a challenge.

In order to address the issues convincingly, Ms Connors had to learn the intricacies of bond financing.

I have a new found relationship [with] the Superintendent for Administration and Finance. We get along extremely well and he has been a very patient tutor in teaching me a great deal about the intricacy of the school system finances in a very short period of time. And I have been a very willing student. I am a person who will keep my mouth shut and listen. I know what I don't know and I didn't know anything about the finances.

The sales tax referendum included a dedicated agenda with a 1 year sunset provision -- a strategy deliberately different from previous school district efforts. It told the public exactly how the monies would be spent [i.e., salaries, instructional materials, maintenance, compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act, in-school suspension, counselors, debt service, etc.].

One week before the election, the editorial board of the major city newspaper surprisingly urged voters to vote "Yes" and stop the further deterioration of the public school system. The editorial decision was strongly influenced by the dedicated agenda for public schools and its adherence to fiscal responsibility. On election day, 35 percent of the voters went to the polls, and by a margin of approximately 1,800, 51 percent cast ballots in support of the public school sales tax.

#### School Board Relationships

Less than three weeks before the voters went to the polls on the sales tax, Ms. Connors woke up to read in the morning papers that united School Board support for the proposal had been publicly shattered. The lone African-American member on the School Board, who had initially objected to Ms. Connors' selection, but had sided with the Board's decision, spoke out against the tax because it failed to restore personnel [i.e., reading teachers and librarians] and facilities' [a Career Center]: two areas cut during the last two retrenchment years and which most directly affected this board member's constituency.

Ms. Connors was "flabbergasted." "He certainly didn't discuss it with me. Not having had the opportunity to talk with him, or discuss the issue, I don't know what effect it will have." The



board member responded,

I wasn't consulted in formulating this proposal and it was presented to me as 'take it or leave it.' Vocational education is of a higher priority than some of the items listed on the proposal. The Career Center will have to be addressed on any ballot. I've got a responsibility to my constituents to look out for them.

He also claimed that the dedicated agenda on the ballot did not provide any funds for long range planning, an issue which he knew would align him with at least one other Board Member who consistently voiced opposition to the superintendent. Behind the scenes, Ms. Connors worked to win his support. Publicly, she explained how the alternative proposal could not work given mandates in state and local financing. One week later, the board member reconsidered his position stating that, "A dedicated agenda, however faulty, is better than no agenda at all."

Although Ms. Connors had successfully weathered her first political conflict, she began to learn that board politics turned more often on the priorities of individual board member's constituencies than the needs for the district as a whole. From the outset, however, she was both savvy and philosophical about school board votes:

I don't get emotionally involved in issues that I put on the agenda that I bring to the Board. If it passes, fine; if it doesn't, I go back and start over again. I don't take that personally. What I do get very emotional about is when I go out talking to parents and working with kids....I guess maybe I have just learned how to divorce myself from issues, but I can't divorce myself from people.

Her early, personal assessment of individual Board members was that most tried very hard to do a good job, and were sincere and concerned about improving the system. In fact, she seemed to genuinely like working with all but two. Although there has been consistent opposition from these two board members, only one of these relationships "ossified": "I don't perceive there is anything I can do about it at this point.... The real issue for me is that we have to have some common ground, some common goals." There was, however, one particular board member who Ms. Connors really liked, the new board President. Ms. Connors' description of the new President was that she

is young, energetic and has a lot going for her in terms of what she thinks the school system can accomplish. So I think it is going to be a really good year and am looking forward to it.... I call her a lot. I really like her. She is an attorney and is very bright and I very much like gifted people. She is funny, decisive, can be sarcastic, but I just like working with her and I also call her and bounce something off of her which is probably kind of strange because she is the same age as my daughter. I obviously could be her mother, but we have



a very nice working relationship.

Midway through her first year, she assessed her relationship with the School Board as follows:

They are beginning to coalesce as a Board; they act by consensus across districts, not independent by political districts. You may not want to go spend your spare time with them when you get off in the afternoons, but there has to be a sense of professional respect and I think that they are very interested in pursuing that.... Our life experience has been such that we become rather cynical or perhaps even sardonic. Most assuredly some people become paranoid and it is because life has taught you to be that way... I think if we learn to develop a sense of trust and respect that you can deal with that in a professional arena and have that be the parameter around which you develop the decision making process of the Board.

She described her working relationship with the Board as follows:

I feel very autonomous. I don't ever feel, 'Oh gee, well no matter how great an idea that is, I better check with people first.' I don't feel I have to pick up the phone and call and say 'May I.' I often pick up the phone and call and say, 'You know, I think this is really a great idea and I would like to bounce it off of you, what do you think about it, how do you feel about it....' I talk to board members, but I don't ever call them up and say, 'Do I have your permission to do it.' My management style is that you hired me and you pay me a lot of money to tell you, to make recommendations to you, about the running of the school system. Now let me do it. However, I do let board members know before something happens so they will know about it. I am a person who feels that information is power, and so if you get as much information as possible, then you have empowered everybody. So I always keep everybody informed and I send out lots of FYI's. If one board member asks for information then I send it to all board members. I don't want anybody to feel that there are games being played that one board member is getting more attention or more information than another.

At first, only one board member, the lone minority representing the single minority district, had, in Ms. Connors' view, tried to micro-manage the school system.

Yea, he does that. I like to believe that there is hope that he will eventually realize that that's not necessary and indeed probably is inappropriate or he'll begin to get enough confidence that things are being done right without his having to super micro manage...a lot of it reverts back to how many black females and males are in administrative positions.

Throughout her tenure, superintendent-board communications, especially written communications, were characterized by a tone quite different from other superintendent communications. The "office of the superintendent" in itself elicited little respect from Board members. Internal memos, letters, notes, and faxes were often devoid of the usual, if not cursory, pleasantries found in other business, government, public written communications. Rarely, did a board member provide a reasoned explanation for why he or she was requesting specific information, even when the gathering of that information would require the superintendent's staff to spend a great deal of peoplehours to complete the task. For example, a fax to the director of personnel requested, "Please send me a list of positions, that requires a Master's Degree, and let me know by positions, if it is a state requirement and/or this school system's requirement." Another letter requested "a review of all central office positions take place so that a determination can be made regarding which should be 12 month positions...[and which] have been converted to 11 months or less."

On more than one occasion, Ms. Connors' responses also departed from her usual polite manner and tone. For example, she wrote, "In spite of the 'confusion' which existed around your request...and the opposition to it from other board members, I began to put together the information you requested...[however] the greater question here is that the Superintendent cannot serve all nine Board members unless the majority agree on priorities.... I am proceeding with gathering the information requested but this is an example of a situation where the Superintendent's judgment should prevail on how quickly the information can be provided. It will simply take time." When the information was not forthcoming in the agreed upon timeframe, the Board member wrote back to Ms. Connors, "Please be reminded that I am still waiting ... I am not impressed that a department that spends over a million dollars per year is not adequately computerized that its expenditures can be reviewed in a multiplicity of ways by a stroke of a finger."

In addition its being directive, Superintendent-Board written communications could be characterized as defensive, sarcastic, and petulant. Here are three examples of memos crossing the superintendent's desk:

**Defensive:** It happens to all of us [that we cannot make all meetings]. I never take it personally if my calendar cannot be accommodated... I never think of it as a conspiracy; no slight was intended to you personally....

**Sarcastic:** I cannot believe knowing what I know about your belief in fair play and equal opportunity that you will allow this type of unfair treatment to continue.

**Petulant:** I was surprised, disappointed, and disgusted to receive and read your notice on Friday evening that there is a special executive session scheduled for Monday,.... Give me a reference which says that Board members must publicize all meetings during which educational matters are discussed.... While I am indeed the 'new kid on the block,' I have not

observed a practice of this type by other Board members.

The contrast between the positive public support and the behind the scenes criticisms were always evident. Yet, even by the end of her tenure, Ms. Connors received a school board vote of 7 to 2 to extend her contract; and, when she announced her resignation, there was an outpouring of public efforts including newspaper editorials urging her to reconsider. She never did. Why?

In the discussions to extend her first contract, there was a conflict between Ms. Connors and the person she had nurtured in the role of board president. Ms. Connors' contract extension coincided with school board elections. Incumbents, who have rarely been unseated let alone challenged, looked to their constituencies first in drafting their platforms. To the surprise of Ms. Connors, the young President of the board told the newspapers that her opposition to Ms. Connors was not personal; rather, it was based on a difference in educational philosophy. Specifically, she objected to Ms. Connors' placing emphasis on a new social agenda instead of the school system's academic mission, an issue that reflected the latter's constituency. In the past, Ms. Connors divorced the personal from the political. Not this time. She viewed the board President's actions as an attack on not only what the superintendent believed was the right socially responsible agenda for Madison County (Beck, 1992), but also in terms their meaningful and supportive relationship (Gilligan, Ward, Taylor, & Bardige, 1988). To Ms. Connors, the President acted in terms of self-interest, and as such was irresponsible and immoral (Beck, 1992; Gilligan, 1982).

### The New Social Agenda

The dedicated items which passed with the bond issue represented a not so subtle shift towards by introducing social change realities into the mainstream values of suburban middle America. While she continued to support the values of competency and efficiency, cultural literacy, student achievement [with a strong "pass to play" board policy], and the implementation of character and values education, she injected programs responding caringly to the challenge of social problems (Beck, 1992), arguing for increased support of a 'drug free school program', development and implementation of programs that identify and target 'at-risk' student populations, implementation of a mentoring program [prominent Black professionals, judges and politicians] [Boys to Men] for minority youth, elementary social work/counselor program, in-school suspension in the middle and high schools, and, implementation of a new K-2 promotion policy of no retention. In short, she argued, in social terms, for a broad curriculum "that meets the ever changing educational needs of the individuals, the community, the state and the nation."

Evenwhile Ms. Connors' office filled with congratulatory flowers and gifts right after the election, Ms. Connors took immediate steps to re-build the business-government-schools coalitions. She worked to establish business-education collaborations [e.g., data processing, libraries, recreation]; a

stronger public relations program; and, more parental involvement in school decision-making process of the school system.

In her first year, she won passage of most of her program. Still, there were areas unlikely to receive school board support and funding. One such program was staff development on diversity.

We don't have money for consultants. I very much would love to be able to pay for someone to come to Madison County, and over the course of this next year work with the staff, on cultural relationships, not just black-white relations. We have a lot of Hispanic populations, Vietnamese, East Indian.... We have a lot of cultural differences. I just would like someone to come and start to work with the administrators in the schools and school system in central office to help them understand one another's diversities, because I find that very frustrating. I hear an awful lot of jokes, things bandied about, disparaging remarks.... My personal plan is to address ethnic differences, to begin to deal more with the 'at-risk' child, and to really deal with community issues [such as safety].

#### Context Summary

On the assumption it is not one thing about a context that explains why an individual acted in a particular way, we looked at context from multiple perspectives: demographics, relationships, issues, and politics. Managing a large school district without an adequate central office staff was a condition Ms. Connors inherited and chose to live with. Perhaps she saw the issue of increased central office staff as being political or not an appropriate request in a district lacking funds and while campaigning for fiscal responsibility. Perhaps she thought she could do the job by herself.

How naive for her to say that she "wasn't interested in the politics of the board;" although, Ms. Connors did articulate a sophisticated political strategy to minimize the emotional effects of losing on any one particular issue. The problem she encountered was that as soon as she developed closer working relationships with board members, relationships became person and political, but not friendly -- as evidenced by the written communications.

Finally, in terms of issues and politics, the immediacy of the sales tax election linked to a new social agenda, both of which were inherited upon entry into the superintendency, created a whirlwind pace that is difficult to sustain.

#### Person:

Along the dimension of person are issues of personality/femininity, educational and work background, insider, tireless work ethic, and caring leadership. The very nature of a contextual study argues against analyzing stand alone person variables. Nevertheless, knowing who Ms. Kathleen Connors is becomes important in understanding the reasons for her quick exit from the superintendency.

### Personality/Femininity

Everyday, before coming to the office, Ms. Connors would attend 6 AM mass, "to put the day's work into perspective." She combined her faith in God with what education could do for all children.

I think that there is no such thing as fate. I think you make your own fate and I think that you either decide to deal with whatever the dilemma is in a professional fashion and **get the best that can be gotten from it** or you just capitulate and say, "oh it was me" and start wearing a hair shirt and start beating yourself with a cat-o-nine tails. I'm not a masochistic person; **I do not believe in beating myself up over something I can't control**; I know what I can and cannot control. [my emphasis added].

Not only was church and faith important, so was her husband's support.

I don't have any small children and I have a wonderful husband and I can spend time that I want as is needed doing whatever it is we want to do. So, I think that it's a very wise use of my time to be constantly the spokesperson for public education.

My biggest booster, my biggest fan is my husband. He continues to be extremely supportive of me and I think that makes a real big difference in your ability to concentrate on what you have to get done every day. If your personal life is in order, I wouldn't denigrate the role your personal life plays in your success in your professional world....

Her husband's background in state politics was a political training ground for Ms. Connors. It not only gave her skills, it also provided her with a powerful constituency of her own. Just as importantly, the years in politics seemed to prepare her mentally for the superintendency.

I've never had to sit down and have a good cry over anything.... Nothing has ever made me feel frustrated to that point. I've gotten aggravated; I've even gotten angry, bewildered, hurt, but never have I felt that there was a situation that I just wanted to turn around and walk off from and just keep driving and not bother to come back. I have never been at home at night gnashing my teeth or wanting to burst into tears; I have never had that happen.

### Insider

As a veteran insider, Ms. Connors already knew eight of the nine board members and many of the 7,000 employees in the entire system. With that advantage came a disadvantage. She and the staff had to adapt to each other in new roles after having worked



together in Madison County for 14 years.

I didn't choose the staff; the staff already existed. And, there can be some natural resentment particularly towards somebody who has risen through the ranks and used to be considered at this level with everybody else and now has moved into the position of the chief executive officer.

In addition, as an insider and a "unanimous" compromise candidate, many people in Madison County thought they knew everything about Ms. Connors, including how she would act as superintendent. Should her leadership deviate from the foreseeable path, however, it could create cognitive dissonance throughout the school district.

#### Educational and Work Background

Kathleen Connors' professional and educational backgrounds are not typical of most district superintendents (Glass, 1994). Her resume lists only one year of self-contained classroom teaching experience in an out-of-state school and no school building administrative experiences. Instead, she worked as a gifted and talented consultant, a special education director in the Madison County Schools Central Office, and, previously, as Assistant Superintendent for Personnel. Her tenure in the Central Office gave her a working relationship with eight of the nine members on the school board, and as the district's top personnel officer, she knew many of the system's 7,000 employees. "The two jobs [i.e., director of special education and central office personnel administrator] that I had prepared me better than anything else one could have possibly done. Those two were the worst jobs in the school system in terms of complaints, problem solving, balancing job responsibilities, night time work, weekend work, legal aspects, and the giant load."

Similarly atypical was her educational background which was primarily in counseling, school psychology, and special education. Although she held an administrative certificate, the state, at the time, did not require any more than two administration courses for certification. Not surprisingly, when asked about educational administration courses, she stated that it was "not what you studied, but that you studied something and demonstrated self-discipline to study that is important." What she valued most was her special education perspective applied to all children and her background in personnel. What she has come to value in her first year as superintendent were matters of finance

because that was never something that I had to have any particular responsibilities for beyond setting up the budget for whatever particular aspect of the school system I was responsible for at the time; never did I have the universal responsibility for the entire school system.



## Tireless Work Ethic

From the time she received the "invitation" to serve as superintendent, Ms. Connors was aware of the

... commitment involved, the amount of time, effort, energy, and the amount of spirit. You have to be devoted to this job if it is going to be done right. And, I thought whether or not I have the desire to do it and if I have the capacity for it.

As soon as the election results were announced, Ms. Connors publicly stated that, "No one person can take credit for this; the parents came out in droves to support it." Most public sentiment, however, credited Kathleen Connors personally for the victory. "She has been tireless in her efforts." "Everytime I turned on the TV, radio, or heard about meetings, you showed up or sent someone. You went the extra mile!" "We feel that the sales tax passage was due to your leadership and untiring efforts." "You are certainly a powerful image building component of our educational process." "Our superintendent cares for public education and is not afraid to stand by her beliefs." "We owe its passing to your devotion to young people and your personal wholesomeness and integrity - you are what you represent and your sincerity shows!" "I believe that your detailed presentation of exactly how the money from the 1/2 cent sales tax would be used, and the good feeling about Madison County Schools contributed to the victory." The victory and post election comments all expressed unprecedented confidence in the new superintendent.

Ms. Connors' energy, commitment, and accomplishments extended far beyond the boundaries of Madison County public schools. Prior to her superintendency, the Governor had appointed her Chairperson of the State Board of Trustees of Higher Education. She often wore both her public school and higher education hats in reminding him that "leaders from business, government, higher education, and public schools are ready to discuss common problems and perhaps more importantly to arrive at some common policies to improve the quality of life in our state." One colleague, a school superintendent whose district included the state capital, wrote that "your eloquent comments at the meeting held with the Governor .... The cogent, clearly delineated remarks were very impressive." Additionally, as superintendent, Ms. Connors was appointed to the steering committee of a powerful business alliance for school reform; she was appointed by the State Superintendent to his Advisory Committee; she initiated a meeting among the major school districts in the state; she initiated cooperative arrangements between the county government and the school system and between Madison County and her neighboring school districts. Ms. Connors was indeed comfortable being in the midst of power.

Nine months or so into her first year as superintendent, Ms Connors described her feelings about the job as follows:

I like my job. I am happy. I get up every morning with a sense of a spring in my step. I am very glad to wake up in the morning...I am enjoying it very much.

If there are criticisms, I don't know about them.... This is a job in which people are only too pleased to tell you about criticisms, and I don't hear that.... I work too hard.... I work so hard that people appreciate that and that overcomes a lot of criticisms, because they don't see me sitting back and taking it easy.

Yet, the 12 hour days were becoming more difficult to sustain.

It's just a very frustrating job because there's never enough hours in the day. I'm always running; there's always something that I haven't done; always something that I want to do.... It's just an extremely demanding job, requiring a high level of energy and you really got to have your internal self straight because if not, you can just get to feeling real down about things....

#### Caring Leadership

Children were clearly the centerpiece of Ms. Connors' leadership philosophy. What every audience heard from her were emotional messages on the importance of public education and of the many wonderful things happening to children in Madison County Schools.

We really touch the life of the child every day. When I talk to people, parent groups, civic groups, I can get so emotional on the subject that I literally almost end up in tears because I am so intense on the subject. I don't speak from notes ever. I just stand up and talk to people and I look in their faces and look in their eyes. I get very emotional about things like students looking fresh and hopeful and just full of excitement and anticipation. I am making life better for them, trying to help them.

Ms. Connors went directly, and often, to the public. She built her support outward from the children to parents, the school system to the larger community.

#### Parents:

I think there is something about the body politic that when people collectively get together as a group that it is sometimes easy to lose that focus [that children are important]. But I think as individuals they truly do believe in the importance of the child.... I look to parents.... I think we sometimes take them for granted or we just sometimes forget about them. But to me the biggest power I've got is the power of the parent, the support of the parent....I think you marshall [parent power] by making

the parents realize that the one thing that is the most important, the one thing that is the Achilles' heel for most parents is that child. That's their one area of vulnerability. And that by working together and taking our vulnerability for our children, we can turn it into a strength. We can make people recognize that those children are powerful messages we are sending out into the future... I asked the parents to work with me....I stand up in front of them and make an impassioned plea to work with me....

### Business and Government

I have been to see every elected official in the district; I have gone to see and speak before every body, every board....I have spoken before all of these groups of people introducing myself, telling them what my hopes and aspirations are for this school system, pledging the cooperation of the school board, asking them to work with us so that we don't necessarily have to spend more money, but that when we pool our resources, this synergy takes place and that we can get a whole lot more for our dollars by working together than we can by working as a separate entity. I have been to see all the people I think are interested in schools. I have gone to speak to the Chamber of Commerce, the Sheriff, the Assessor, -- with all the people I think have any kind of ability to work with the public at large and also work with the school system.... It made me get out into the public and it focused my energies on developing an agenda for children.... If I'm going to be pilloried for something, I'd just as soon be hung up on a cross for children as for anything else I could think of.

One local television personality introduced Kathleen Connors on her show as a "delight" and a "gift" to Madison County. Staff say she restored a "dignity and quiet" to the central office. Throughout the school system, there was more pride expressed among administrators, teachers, and staff than in a long time. ["You're the best superintendent we've had during my 22 years..."]. The compliments were not just about the new social programs, but also about a new image, a human image with a sense of caring (Beck, 1992; Starratt, 1991; Gilligan, et al., 1988; Gilligan, 1982). Part of that caring meant that new voices were being heard; this feeling of inclusion extended towards minority candidates [primarily African Americans] for administrative positions. She reached out often to individuals [from principals to custodians] who were involved daily in "saving lost souls" (Lightfoot, 1983 cited in Beck, 1992). "I think it's very important that the school system have somebody who's speaking about all the good things that are going on out there." While she accepted and emphasized the public role of the superintendency, she was also aware of the price one pays.

It's a whole lot easier not to let people see you as vulnerable, not to let people see what's important to you,

not to let people know you as a person, because if they knew all those things then they could hurt you in some kind of a way, or then can take advantage of you. I think that superintendents, particularly in large public school systems, have a very difficult job. You're under a microscope 24 hours a day.... I literally cannot even go to the grocery store without somebody walking up to me and talking to me about an issue. I find that I have lost a lot of my privacy. I have to always look nice when I go out. If I were to go out on the weekend in my cutoff blue jeans and my flip flops or whatever, you know the kind of things most people feel very comfortable about running down to the store to pick up a carton of milk, people would probably think, 'would you believe, look how she dresses'; your life has become one big public book for everybody to slip a page in, to make a comment about, and it's real easy to begin to hide behind either layers of administrators or to hide behind layers of statistics and facts and figures. I guess I'm still fresh enough and naive enough and optimistic enough that I believe you make more of a difference when you are vulnerable... It may be more painful for you but you definitely can make more of a difference. I tend toward believing that people usually function from an emotional base and they usually function from a life experience base which teaches them to either believe or not believe in people. [By what I say and do] it makes people feel like there's a human being sitting in the superintendent's chair.

But if you get out there, it means that you are going from early morning to late at night, and I do not know how long a person can keep it up without beginning to feel either physical reaction to it or maybe even an emotional reaction to it, beginning to feel resentful that you never have time for yourself and do the things you want to do. So, there has to be somehow a striking of a sense of balance in all that to where you do not give 100% of your time because no one can do that.

#### Person Summary

Most personal characteristic are not subject to change; they just are. The "givens" here included Ms. Connors' atypical background prior to the superintendency including her lack of classroom and building experiences, her insider status, and her caring feelings for children and relationships. What she might be able to control and change were the enormous amounts of time devoted to the job and her "upfront and out there" leadership style.

#### Conclusions

Ms. Kathleen Connors was certainly the right person at the right time with respect to "upfront and out there" leadership on the school bond issue. She also stabilized the superintendency,

uplifting the spirits of the entire district in the name of public education. Her charm, "silver-tongue," tireless work ethic, and caring leadership enabled those outside the traditional power structures, such as minorities, parents and children to participate meaningfully in decision. But all this was still not sufficient to overcome the multidimensionality, multicontextuality of the superintendency. The cliché of being the right person in the right place at the right time can be only a momentary reality in the lives of superintendents.

When it came time to implement the program outlined by the dedicated agenda of the school bond issue, the task was more than just winning a school board majority. In fact, the school board was politically obligated to pass the items on the ballot; but they were not obligated to support them as instruments of real change. That leadership task extended beyond the political realm to a broader knowledge of educational programs, social issues, and change processes. Ms. Connors was administratively competent, politically astute, and mentally tough; but only up to a certain point. Her administrative competency which included learning the intricacies of bond funding could not make up for the fact that she had no one to turn to in doing much of the work. There was a small central office staff, none of whom was hired by Ms. Connors. She had no deputy, no staff assistant, no full-time secretary. Administratively, the work kept piling up. With the new social program agenda and growth, the pressures to see changes implemented were more than any one person could manage well. In another setting, she could have delegated tasks to a central office leadership team or to outside consultants. In Madison County, however, Ms. Kathleen Connors had no choice but to try to do it all, lead the battle and see it through.

Politically, Ms. Connors rarely lost; and when she did, her mental toughness allowed her to separate people from issues and problems. As a former personnel administrator, she often asked people what they would do in her shoes. It made making the tough decisions easier; decisions followed the rules and were a matter of fairness.

Yet, people always mattered to Ms. Connors. With adults, she developed relationships; with children, she acted in their best interests. She was there for both groups. In defining her own leadership style as "upfront and out there," Kathleen made relationships, many of them interpersonal, inside and out of the school system, a central tenet of her superintendency. In speeches and private meetings, she publicly cared about her audience, revealing herself through personal anecdotes, ribald stories and jokes, tears, and hugs. She sought connections, declared her support and commitment, and asked others to join her in educating all the children of Madison County. She recognized, too, that these actions made her vulnerable, to supporters and enemies alike. Her commitment and responsiveness to others epitomized her morality of leadership (Gilligan, et al., 1988). But as a leader, she was more a symbol of hope and change than a "nuts and bolts" educator. Her words were more about directions and feelings than about specific programs and implementation strategies. In fact, when it came to programmatic decisions and



choices, her decisions as evidenced by school board debates regarding extracurricular activities, vocational education, or librarians, etc. were not always reflective of "best practices." Caught between fiscal responsibility and favoring children, Ms. Connors tried to walk a very fine line. Yet,

The greatest challenge is keeping children as the focus. There are so many extraneous aspects to the superintendency...to get everyone to agree that children are the reason we are here...if really what we're trying to do is produce a finished product in terms of a moral human being who can then go out there and do whatever it is he or she has to do, we've got the thing [testing and test scores] all upside down and backwards because the majority of children in public schools, particularly in the South are not going on to college.

Ms. Connors put children and public education on a pedestal -- as she, herself, had been placed on a pedestal after the sales tax victory. But the image of a "feminine pedestal" was not about one strong individual picking it up to hit others over the head. Rather, she used the pedestal to encourage others to step up their work, to reach higher, to expect more of themselves and children, and to essentially join her on the pedestal (Beck, 1992; Gilligan, 1982).

#### Quick Exit

Why would someone as popular as Kathleen Connors, with 7-2 school board support, leave? One of the two negative votes against Kathleen was cast by a board member with whom no relationship had ever developed or was likely to develop. Ms. Connors defined the relationship as "ossified" and irrelevant; "irrelevant as that hat rack in the corner," she later told me. Yet, however, irrelevant the relationship/vote seemed to Kathleen, it represented a different view of governance and mission to others, one that upholds more traditional notions of student academic achievement and standards. It took aim directly at the so-called nonacademic direction of Kathleen's social programs. Even though others on the board may not have been willing to publicly challenge this popular superintendent, this opposing perspective defined the academic-social agenda debate, however fallacious, leaving enough space for board members to distance themselves from the superintendent depending upon their constituencies. Less than six months after Ms. Connors left, the position of new board President was taken by this one negative voice, who now enjoys similar majorities of school board member votes.

While the above negative vote reflects the dominant culture of Madison County and the politics of its school board, the other negative vote was cast by the young, energetic [now former] board President with whom Ms. Connors had formed a close working and personal [even mother-daughter like] relationship. To Kathleen, this vote crossed the line between programmatic and personal



distinctions, between public and private (Gilligan, 1988) feelings. In describing the difference, Ms. Connors once said, "Now, if someone tries to attack me or my family on a personal level that is a different situation. But no one has done that." That was true up until this one vote.

The distinction between what is political and what is personal was central to Ms. Connors' leadership. To the young board member, the vote reflected a fear that her white, middle class constituency would not re-elect her if she supported the social agenda of the superintendent. The young board member sought to differentiate her personal support and liking of the superintendent with her "principled" opposition to social programs. Although Kathleen never publicly labelled the opposition in relational terms, it meant more than a difference of opinion on educational purposes; it was a violation of trust.

Ms. Connors was perhaps naive to assume that in one short year the political culture of Madison County and her interpersonal relationships could change policies and practices. While Kathleen successfully achieved political consensus on individual items, she sought deeper changes reflected in new attitudes within Madison County's political culture. In order for Madison County officials to embrace personal development and community growth (Beck, 1992) over political alliances and individual success, Ms. Connors would have needed to remain in office longer to enable others to see change along the lines she advocated. Even if she had, however, it is not certain that she would have succeeded. In addition to our knowing how hard it is and how long it takes to change political cultures (Deal & Peterson, 1991), Ms. Connors' leadership was primarily symbolic and embracing. What she did was to create an environment that enhanced other peoples' ability to do the "stuff" of learning and teaching. Yet, lacking herself the "stuff" of transformational leadership, and perhaps not seeing it in those around her, Kathleen chose to exit quickly.

As for the future of Madison County public school and Ms. Connors, the former has already retrenched, naming a sitting board member as a interim replacement for Ms. Connors. No superintendent search or personnel changes will be made until after the next elections -- if then. It is unlikely that any of the incumbents will lose. While other superintendents might be happy to stay under these same conditions, not Kathleen. She has decided to leave while her image is still on the pedestal. It is unlikely that she will take another district superintendency; there are other arenas, educational and political, now open to her.

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